UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
Fall 2019

POL2503H:
Thinking Through Research Design

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Overview:
This course is designed for MA students. It provides an introduction to the logic and principles of research design and surveys the range of research strategies commonly used in quantitative and qualitative empirical research. It is an introductory course, so no background in research methods or design is required.

Objectives:
To gain an understanding of research design as used in political science, to critically evaluate research designs used in the literature, and to develop the foundations to come up with research questions and feasible designs to answer them.

Prerequisites:
None beyond admission the Political Science MA program.

Teaching method:
Weekly two-hour seminar led by the instructor, written assignments, and an independent project.

Assignments, Grade Breakdown, and Policy on Absences:
- Two 1500-word response papers (15% for the first paper, 25% for the second paper). The papers should summarize and contrast the arguments in all readings of a given week. Papers handed in at least a week early automatically earn a 3% bonus. Please submit an electronic version by email and a printout in class. The papers are due on October 16 and 30 in class and are to be written on the readings of that week.
- Class participation (20%). Quantity is greatly encouraged. Political scientists are a loquacious tribe so get used to talking a lot.
- 500-word research design proposal (10%), due November 18 (Monday) by email. This is simply a one-page, first draft that states your research question, gives a glimpse at how you would want to answer it, and some sense of the variation in outcomes to be explained. The short proposals will be shared and discussed by the whole class and written feedback will be provided by the instructor.
- Final research design proposal (30%), due December 9 in class. This is a long (4-5 pages plus references) version of your research design. It should be written like the first part of an empirical research paper, with an introduction, a literature review that highlights gaps in knowledge or anomalies, the actual research question(s) and/or hypotheses, and a brief description of how you would go about answering or testing these. You do not need to talk about the methodology in any detail beyond that.

Wednesdays 10:00am-12:00pm
Larkin Building 214
Office hours: Tuesdays, 2:00-4:00pm, and by appointment (recommended)
• Late submission of assignment incurs a penalty of 5% per day, including weekend days. Extensions can only be granted in cases of medical or family emergencies and require documentation as appropriate (e.g. the university-prescribed medical note substantiating that no term work could be undertaken during specific periods of time).

• Two absences are allowed without requiring any further documentation, though I appreciate a notice by email beforehand if you know that cannot attend the session. Other absences require a medical note.

Readings: You should purchase the following required texts, available at the bookstore:


All other readings are available on Quercus.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a most serious academic offense and the offender will be punished. Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to Turnitin.com for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the Turnitin.com reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University’s use of the Turnitin.com service are described on the Turnitin.com web site.

Auditing the course: Graduate students may be allowed to audit the course at the instructor’s discretion and space permitting.

Contacting the instructor: Office hours are listed above, but please confirm by email that I will be holding office hours that day, as my MGA Director role often requires a change of schedule. If you cannot make those, please ask for an alternative appointment by e-mail.

Session 1 (Sep 11): Course Overview
This introductory week will have mainly logistical objectives and provide an overview of the course.

Required
Brancati, Chapter 1 (pp. 3—12)

Session 2 (Sep 18): Research Design in Theory and Practice

Required
KKV, pp. 3—28.
Brady and Collier, pp. 111—122, “The importance of research design.”

Recommended
Brancati, Chapter 3 (pp. 31—41)
Session 3 (Sep 25): No class because of conference travel
This class will be rescheduled to December 9, 10am-12pm, location to be confirmed.

Session 4 (Oct 2): Experimental and Quasi-experimental Designs
Required
Brancati, Chapter 18 and 19
KKV, pp. 199—206

Session 5 (Oct 9): Variables, Hypotheses, Inference and Thinking Causally in Qualitative and Quantitative Research
Required
KKV, Chapters 2 and 3, and pp. 185—198.
Brancati, Chapter 9
Recommended

Session 6 (Oct 16): Single Cases and Comparative Case Study Research
Required

Session 7 (Oct 23): The Difference Assumptions Make
Required
Session 8 (Oct 30): Measurement – Reliability and Validity

Required
Brancati, Chapter 15 and 16.

Session 9 (Nov 13): Gathering Data and Ethics in Research

Required
KKV, Chapter 4
Brancati, Chapters 10, 11, and 13

Session 10 (Nov 20): In-class project: Coming up with a good research question

In this session, we will briefly discuss the short research design proposals and offer constructive feedback. The required readings for the session are the proposals that will be shared on Monday (18th) in the evening.

Session 11 (Nov 27): The Challenge of Cross-National Research

Required
Mahoney, James. 2007. “Qualitative Methodology and Comparative Politics.” Comparative Political Studies 40(2): 122–44.

Session 12 (Dec 4): Counterfactual Thinking and Research Design

Required

Makeup session (Dec 9, location TBC): Final research proposals due

The complete research design proposals are due in this session. We will discuss a selection of proposal in greater detail for those who are interested in applying to PhD programs or who are already planning their MA thesis work. If you submit the final version before December 9 and are willing to share it with your peers, you will receive better feedback. For the rest, prepare a 5-minute presentation of your final research design.